

Silvana Greco and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger

Introduction: In Honor of Giulio Busi

Academic Career

Giulio Busi's brilliant academic career is rooted in a passion for Jewish culture and language. It is a passion born at the end of high school, almost by accident. A young student, rebellious against bourgeois conventions, Giulio is thunderstruck by reading a book, which had been translated into Italian for the publisher Adelphi¹. This small volume, purchased in 1978, will radically change his life. It is a short essay, entitled "Walter Benjamin and His Angel" (*Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*), written by the best-known Jewish scholar of the time, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). Scholem weaves the story about his friend Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and Paul Klee's (1879–1940) 1920 painting *Angelus novus*, which Benjamin had purchased in the following year (Fig. 1). In the footsteps of Scholem and Benjamin, and thanks to the arcane force emanating from Klee's art, Giulio is captured by the Jewish world, still mysterious to him.

Giulio Busi was born in Italy, in Bologna, on September 6th, 1960. After Montessori kindergarten, which was an important moment for his creative development, he attended elementary and middle school, and then continued his studies at the "Galvani" classical high school, the same one where the great Pier Paolo Pasolini studied a few decades earlier. Giulio does not like mathematics but is passionate about humanities. He is an introverted young man, a tireless reader and a brilliant student, top of the class in Latin, Greek and history. A "protester," as they used to say at the time, often in conflict with his family and the very conservative professors at the Liceo Galvani, a bastion of Bologna's good middle class.

"Away from home as soon as you can" is the motto of much of his generation. But where to go? From Bologna to Venice the distance is not that great, but the cultural leap, in those years, is considerable. The lagoon city was then rather *délabré* and not yet "rediscovered," although the "new" carnival kermes was about to begin. In 1979, Giulio enrolled in the degree programme in Oriental Languages at Ca' Foscari University, where he attended, often as the only student, lectures on Hebrew language and literature given by the late Bruno Chiesa, a beloved teacher. On June 23, 1983, he graduated with a dissertation on a philological topic, entitled *Horayat ha-qore': Una grammatica ebraica del secolo XI*, which he published, in 1984, with Peter Lang.

1 Cf. Gershom Scholem. *Walter Benjamin e il suo angelo* (Milano: Adelphi, 1978).



Fig. 1: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920 – Israel-Museum in Jerusalem, Alamy Stock Foto © Fine Art Images/Heritages Images.

In 1989, he obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Turin. The doctoral thesis, on *Libri e scrittori nella Roma ebraica del Medioevo*, appeared in print in 1991.

In 1991, aged only 31, he also won the chair of associate professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at Ca' Foscari University, where he would teach until the academic year 1998/1999. In 1991 he was appointed secretary of the Italian Association for the Study of Judaism, a position he held until 1999.

In June 1998 was a turning point in Giulio's career. He won the competition for full professor at the Freie Universität Berlin, where he would direct the renowned Institute of Jewish Studies for nearly a quarter of a century.

He taught as Visiting Professor at renowned European universities. Among them is the ETH – Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich. Thanks to the generous support of the Goren Monti Ferrari Foundation, he taught History of Jewish Thought at the University of Milan (2007-2016) and, since 2017, at USI – Università della Svizzera italiana in Lugano.

Since 2014 he has been an ordinary member of the Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana (Mantua). He was a member of the steering committee of the "European Association for

Jewish Studies (1998–2002) and served, from 2003 to 2011, on the scientific committee of the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe (London).

Scientific and Literary Publications

Giulio Busi is a scholar full of curiosity and a very prolific and eclectic intellectual, who can boast, to date, of 144 scientific publications, including 34 monographs. Beginning in 2000 until today, he has added to these titles, as many as 840 articles in newspapers, published mainly in the *Il Domenicale* supplement of *Il Sole 24 Ore*. There is no shortage of articles in the German press (*Der Tagesspiegel*, *Die Welt*). This is a very large scientific and broader audiences production, which we have tried to classify, not without effort, into four thematic areas. These areas touch on different aspects of Jewish culture, especially in the Diaspora, and its links with different majority societies. These four thematic cores constitute the structure of the present volume. We will recall here only a few of Giulio's works, to illustrate these four main areas of interest. For a more comprehensive survey of Giulio Busi's publications we refer to his bibliography in this volume. It is noteworthy that Giulio's publications and interests have often transgressed the strict boundaries of academic specialization. His pen is responsible for quite a few publications in the fields of general history, art history, and religion, which include biographies of great figures such as Lorenzo de' Medici (2016), Michelangelo (2017), Marco Polo (2018), Christopher Columbus (2020), Julius II (2021), Jesus (2023), John the Apostle (2024), and Francis of Assisi (2025, forthcoming).

The *first* area of study focused on “immaterial” Jewish culture. The very first historical-philological studies on Hebrew language and grammar, which began in the mid-1980s and extended, in the first decade of the 21st century, to Jewish philology and exegesis, belong to this thematic axis.

Giulio's reflections then delved into Jewish mysticism, with a particular focus on qabbalah, a field in which he has become one of the most highly regarded experts. Three volumes are worth mentioning. First, *Qabbalah*, published in 1998 with Laterza. In 2005, Giulio published what is perhaps his most influential book, the *Qabbalah visiva* (Visual Qabbalah). In this pioneering book, Giulio shed light on the aesthetic and visual dimensions of Jewish mysticism, an aspect completely neglected by traditional studies. Crowning this journey is the 2019 volume *Città di luce. La mistica ebraica dei palazzi celesti* published by Einaudi, and subsequently translated into English (2020).

Closely related to mysticism is the investigation of Jewish symbols. In this area, the main work is *Simboli del pensiero ebraico. Lessico ragionato in settanta voci*, from 1999, in which the seventy most symbolically dense words in the Jewish tradition are analyzed. Research on symbolism is taken up in the analysis of artworks of both the Italian Renaissance and some Jewish artists, such as Chagall, in the essay *Chagall il simbolismo ebraico* (2020).

To the *second* area, that of “material” culture (manuscripts, visual arts, Judaica), Giulio has devoted constant attention, ever since he conducted a census of 16th-century Jewish editions in the libraries of Emilia Romagna, which appeared in 1987. Of particular interest is the extensive work of cataloguing the book collection of the Jewish Community of Mantua, now kept at the Municipal Library of the same city. Cataloguing has extended over the years to Jewish printed books of the 16th-18th centuries and to Kabbalistic manuscripts.

The *third* area to which Giulio has brought a lasting contribution concerns the cultural exchange between Judaism and the different environing majority societies. After his first studies on Judeo-Italian, with the publication of Mordecai Dato's *La Istoria de Purim io ve racconto*, (1987), Giulio grappled with Christian Judaism, and in particular with the vast, enigmatic, influential work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. To the Hebrew sources used by Pico is dedicated the series “The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,” of which Giulio is the creator and general editor. This series publishes the mystical texts translated by the convert Flavius Mithridates, both in their Hebrew original and their Latin version as well as a modern English translation of the latter.

Finally, to the *fourth* area of interest we can trace Giulio's reflections on anti-Judaism, from the documents of the time of the Counter-Reformation to the anti-Semitism of the twentieth century. We recall, in this regard, the volume *La pietra nera del ricordo. Giornata della memoria. I primi vent'anni con un contributo di Silvana Greco su Liliana Segre*, published by Il Sole 24 Ore in 2020, which collects a selection of articles that appeared in the *Domenicale* of *Il Sole 24 Ore*. The book is dedicated to the duty to remember, and the difficulty of transforming the awareness of persecution into a general, shared, living heritage.

Love of Visual Arts and Curator of Art Exhibitions

Beginning with his first fascination with Klee's painting, through the *Angelus Novus* owned by Benjamin, Giulio's engagement with the visual arts has continued and expanded to the present day. Suffice to mention the collection of the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, the great Renaissance theorist of art and supreme architect among Giulio's publications.

To this passion for art should be traced the curatorship of exhibitions, which have taken place over the years.

Giulio conceived and curated an international exhibition of the historical collection of Kabbalistic manuscripts of the Jewish community of Mantua (“Mantua and the Qabbalah,” Berlin 2000, Mantua 2001, New York 2002). In 2019, he curated together with Silvana Greco, at the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah in Ferrara, a highly successful exhibition curated entitled “The Renaissance Speaks Jewish.” This

exhibition displayed for the first time some of the most important Renaissance paintings in which the Hebrew language is a powerful element of the painting's iconography and its visual and theological message.

Only close friends know that Giulio privately cultivates a passion for drawing and graphic design. The striking image chosen to illustrate the cover of this volume is a part of one of Giulio's drawings.

Giulio likes to move around a lot, and it will not stop upon his retirement. Whether he continues working in his house in Berlin (Fig. 2), in the garden often visited by the foxes, or in the rolling hills of Mallorca, facing the sea, or in the ancient rooms of Palazzo Bondoni Pastorio in the Mantuan countryside, we wish Giulio many more fruitful years of thinking and writing, faithful to the principle that has inspired him so far: utopian ends, realistic means.

To Giulio, many happy returns

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Fig. 2: Giulio Busi in the library of his house in Berlin © Photo Silvana Greco, All Rights Reserved.

